

More on the SALT Cheating Problem

There has been another flap in Washington about whether the loss of two American monitoring stations in Iran will let the Russians cheat on the pending arms control agreement. C.I.A. Director Stansfield Turner told some Congressmen that it might take until 1984 to replace all the lost capacity. Defense Secretary Harold Brown then acknowledged that it would be at least 1983. But he also reported that enough capacity would be restored in about a year to verify "adequately" Soviet compliance with SALT II. Those who are not grasping at reasons to oppose the treaty should be reassured.

Most of the treaty's limits on strategic weapons could be verified by existing satellites, from monitoring posts in Turkey and in the Pacific, and by other, secret sources. The only portion of the treaty seriously affected by the loss in Iran is the prohibition on developing more than one new type of land-based missile.

The treaty would not prohibit all missile improvements. Instead, it would define in great detail the maximum changes permitted in their size, weight, warheads and other characteristics. Any change beyond these defined limits would be considered an illegal conversion. These are the first qualitative controls in a Soviet-American arms agreement and they require a capacity to detect small alterations in weapons.

But even the smallest of the banned alterations would require about 20 flight tests over a period of

years before the weapon could be considered reliable. And Secretary Brown affirms that the United States will have ample replacements for the Iran monitors long before the Soviet Union could safely violate SALT.

What the stations in Iran provided was a check on a missile's reports back to base during the early stages of flight from the main Soviet testing site in Central Asia. New spy satellites will help to gather such data, and more, by 1983. Meanwhile, information is to be collected by other means, including improved monitors in Turkey and U-2 spy-plane flights. These substitute arrangements could take a year to complete.

Senator Glenn of Ohio suggests that ratification of the treaty be delayed until the substitute monitors are in place. But this would merely extend the period during which the Soviet Union could test a second new missile system without violating anything; it has at least four systems in development. The United States plans no tests soon and so would gain nothing from the delay.

If there is to be a treaty, the sooner it is ratified the sooner certain Soviet missile tests become illegal. Even if there is then a gap of a few months before the Iranian facilities are replaced, the risks would be slight. Soviet cheating would probably be deterred by the futility of an extra test or two and even more by the threat to the whole SALT process that an eventually detected violation would pose.